

A Year Of Painful Change  
Voice Of The Faithful, A Catholic Lay Group, Marks Its First Anniversary

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CHESTNUT HILL, Mass. -- This time last year, a fledging movement called Voice of the Faithful, whose motto is "Keep the Faith, Change the Church," rapidly spread to parishes throughout the Boston Archdiocese and beyond in the wake of the priest sex abuse scandal.

More than 200 people gathered last week at St. Ignatius of Loyola for a Mass of rededication that marked the one-year anniversary of the lay Catholic movement.

Changing the church has not been easy. Despite the pledge of many bishops to listen to the laity, the group's members have at times met stiff resistance in their attempt to engage the church hierarchy in discussions about change.

Even so, Voice of the Faithful is now regarded as the primary voice of the laity within the Catholic Church, said Steven Krueger, the group's executive director.

"Lay people were not speaking directly to their bishops" a year ago, Krueger said. "Today, we have dozens of affiliates who are speaking with their bishops."

Voice of the Faithful has staked out a centrist position, avoiding topics such as women in the priesthood that have polarized other lay organizations in the past. The group advocates for people who have been sexually abused by clergy, supports priests of integrity and promotes structural change within the church.

Some bishops, including Bridgeport Bishop William Lori, have reacted by banning affiliates, called Parish Voices, from meeting on church property, saying the stated goals of the group are not in keeping with church teaching. But the bishop in Brooklyn, N.Y., Thomas V. Daily, recently rescinded his ban on the group there.

"That is extremely significant, for a bishop to reverse his decision publicly over a three- or four-month period," Krueger said. "He not only rescinded his ban, but stated that in his review of our documents that nothing we were doing or saying was against the teaching of the Catholic Church."

According to a survey by the Boston Globe, 60 percent of Catholics polled in the Boston Archdiocese have a favorable view of Voice of the Faithful. A national conference in July 2002 drew more than 4,000 Catholics to Boston. Voice of the Faithful now has 30,000 members nationwide and 177 affiliates.

The group has established a fund, Voice of Compassion, through which Catholics can donate to a diocese's charities without giving directly to the diocese. Many dioceses saw their donations drop significantly because of the sex abuse scandal. Parish Voices in Bridgeport has raised \$10,000 since its fund was established two months ago.

The rededication Mass in Chestnut Hill brought together many of the founders who first gathered in a basement meeting room at St. John the Evangelist Church in Wellesley, Mass.

"I have never seen such faith-filled people; you have to be faith-filled to plow through it this long," said Susan Troy, a founding member at St. John. "Our inspiration is the survivors" of clergy sexual abuse, she said. "And they inspire us, no matter how difficult we think the going is, what they have been going through, what has been done to them, drives us forward."

Jane Macdonald, a member of St. Ignatius, said the movement has been an energizing and unifying force for many Catholics, despite the challenges.

"It brings people together from all over, people we would never have known if we stayed in our own parish," Macdonald said.

"This past year has been but the blink of eye in the 2,000-year history of the church," said James E. Post, Voice of the Faithful's president.

"We stood up and spoke in a clear voice and proclaimed the values and the integrity that we know represent the Catholic Church," said Post, who received a lengthy ovation from those attending the service at St. Ignatius. "A year ago, we were pretty innocent. We thought that by standing up and speaking that we would be heard. Today, we are older and wiser and we know how formidable the challenge is in front of us."

Connecticut has Parish Voices groups in the Bridgeport and Norwich dioceses, and seven groups at parishes in the Hartford Archdiocese.

Archbishop Daniel A. Cronin met last week for the second time since January with a Parish Voices group. He has said he is studying the group to learn more about it.

Post, who has clashed publicly with Lori over his decision to ban the Bridgeport group, said Cronin's meeting is a positive development.

"We believe that when the bishops know who we are, they realize that the people who are part of Voice of the Faithful are very committed Catholics in their diocese," Post said. "They are people who care about the church and care about

the good work of the church. ... There is far more that binds us together than keeps us apart."

From the beginning the group has called for greater transparency in the workings of the church, particularly the parish and diocesan councils that oversee financial and administrative matters.

"There has to be disclosure on what is happening with the money, which is how you prevent slush funds and secret settlements," Post said. "For too long, parish councils have been rubber stamps for the bishop."

The group also has issued a scorecard that affiliates can use to monitor a diocese's compliance with the rules laid out by the bishops' charter on handling allegations of sexual abuse.

Post, who will continue to serve as president until his term ends in November, said he has not yet decided whether to seek another term.

"I think a year ago, no one could have foreseen where we would be today," he said. "And if you ask me where we will be in five years, I really don't know. At the end of the day, the one thing I want people to know about us is that we are faithful Catholics who love the church, and we are determined to make a difference on this issue."

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